

Ribbons of Joy

The second weekend of deer season on the Chippewa National Forest brought me that I had been looking for, in the form of a mild morning, lovely on the stand. The stars faded from the sky, and the light grew in the woods. Birds came alive, and a mixed flock of chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, and some tiny, golden-crowned kinglets were busy feeding here and there.

Time passed, and my mind wandered. I began to reflect on all the changes in family life since this time last year. Members lost; members soon to be gained. My older brother, Rick recently sent me a note. He was expressing wonder at the revelation from his eldest daughter that she is now expecting her sixth child. This will bring Rick's list of grandchildren to twelve, and the number of people he might expect to gather around a table to 22, if only his wife, kids, their spouses and their kids could make their collective ways to a single spot.

And then a moment I had been waiting for, as a deer lined up in the sights of my rifle. It was a killing shot, the kind I like to make, dropping my animal without question. There would be no need for tracking on this occasion.

It wasn't long before I found myself on the ground next to my prey. It's amazing how a piece of ground you've watched for hours can look so different from another angle. From down here the grass and brush was so much taller; the balsams took on another light entirely. I can see why the animal never knew I was here. I smiled at the sky, offering thanks for another fine time. What a fantastic place to spend a beautiful November day! We are so blessed.

The wrapping up of my deer season means I am free to move on to the next thing. For me, that generally means pulling together a few balsam wreaths for friends and family. Especially for those who do not live near here, I like to think of the delightful smell such a gift from the North woods will bring. I find that the collecting of materials and fashioning them together is a chance to blend your love for both the outdoors, and the recipients of the gifts, into one symbolic gesture.

The public lands within the Chippewa National Forest support many tons of bough harvest every year, which helps to feed an active wreath industry. It brings employment opportunities for folks in both the gathering and the creation phases.

Most of my bough collection happens on my own land, on the same favored balsam trees every year. If done properly, bough harvesting is a sustainable activity. If you clip a bough at its base, near the trunk of the tree, that bough is all done growing in the future. But if you leave plenty of the branch still on the tree, taking only a portion of it, what's left will grow back again. It's also important to leave plenty of branches in tact on every tree, so that the tree can continue to thrive and grow. Trees that look like they came from the Charlie Brown Christmas special, with little tufts of green topping trees that have had most of their boughs removed are not going to do so well.

As I build my wreaths, I mix some flat boughs with some of a fuller nature, bringing a shapely dimension to the resulting product. The flat boughs tend to grow on trees that are at least

somewhat shaded. Fir growing in full sun tends towards needles that rotate to the point of taking on a spruce-like shape.

This year my evergreen crafting is a bigger undertaking than usual. There are not only the wreaths for my loved ones, but also the need to provide decorations for my eldest daughter's wedding. A Christmas wedding, Maggie has chosen to decorate her wedding dinner tables with evergreen centerpieces. I will admit that it tickled me she would look to me to help her with this task. Whether she intends to or not, it will be a way of bringing a bit of her North woods roots down to the Big City she currently calls home. The pieces will do double duty. They will be there during supper, and then handed to the guests as they depart. I can't think of a finer way to do things.

So I have been gathering up the necessary greens, so that I can bring down to this girl five basic pieces to which we can together add the decorating touches, which will include the cones of white spruce, white pine, and alder. I happen to have an especially fine crop of white pine cones in my craft cupboard. I gathered them when they first fell to the ground, and the glow of fresh sap had no chance to fade in the weather. At the last moment the bride can add some fresh flowers for a touch of color.

The recipe for these pieces begins with a base of northern cedar, which not only droops nicely over the sides of the container, but brings its own cone crop along for the ride. To this I will add the tips of some very open-grown balsam fir, which will bring structure to the piece. Then comes bundles of white pine needles, which fill in the gaps. In the center Maggie desires a vase, in which to float her wedding candles.

It all gets topped off with a little ribbon that I found at a craft store. I had no idea there was such ribbon in the world. It carries a message proclaiming joy, which seems simple and appropriate for both the wedding and the season.

Like Rick, I have to marvel at how life sort of wanders here and there. Our families grow and branch out, and the seasons of our lives come and go. If we're lucky, woven throughout are little ribbons of joy. Perhaps that comes as a day spent in the woods gathering what we will, or in a garage building the love into some symbols of hope for those who come together to join lives.

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